

Meeting began: 1:04 p. m.
Meeting ended: 1:40 p. m.

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NOTES OF THE PRESIDENT'S
MEETING WITH
THE
JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF

January 29, 1968
Cabinet Room

The President asked the Joint Chiefs if they were completely in agreement that everything has been done to assure that General Westmoreland can take care of the expected enemy offensive against Khesanh.

General Wheeler and all the Joint Chiefs agreed that everything which had been asked for had been granted and that they were confident that General Westmoreland and the troops there were prepared to cope with any contingency.

General Chapman told Walt Rostow that the special ammunition was in the hands of the troops and fully ready to be used if necessary.

General Wheeler: There have been enemy casualties in the Khesanh area.

The President: Are these figures reasonably accurate?

General Wheeler: We count only the ones we find on the battlefield. There is only a 10 percent margin of error in this count. You must remember that a lot of bodies are lost in swamps and waterways and many of them are hauled off by the enemy.

The President: What are you doing with the other aircraft which are not hitting Hanoi and Haiphong?

General Wheeler: They are striking at the Khesanh area, in Laos and in the other parts of South Vietnam.

The President: If you had your way would you also hit Hanoi and Haiphong?

General Wheeler: Yes, sir.

General Johnson: Yes, we would also like to hit Hanoi and Haiphong, Mr. President. We have the capability of doing that.

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General Wheeler: In Vietnam we have the capability of flying 1,000 sorties a day. We're using only 500.

The President: What about the charge that we called up the reserve because of Vietnam and not Korea?

Secretary McNamara: That is not true. We do not need the reserves for Vietnam. In fact, I believe we will demobilize the reserves after Korea.

The President: I sure like the way in which you announced the movement of the aircraft. (The aircraft movement announcement was kept secret in terms of numbers and in terms of the units sent.)

General McConnell: 56 land-based aircraft have already arrived in South Korea. There are 68 planes on carriers. This is roughly 125 already available in South Korea. We will move in 30 more tonight. 29 more are in route.

The President: How many aircraft do we need in South Korea to handle the situation?

General McConnell: The North Koreans have 450 planes. We need at least a equivalent number in South Korea.

The President: Well, I want all of you to know that you have had complete freedom on this matter. But you have got to be ready. I think all of you should be prepared to explain why, if the ship captain needed planes and they were not there, why it was. They were not there because it was not prudent from a military standpoint for them to be there.

General Wheeler: That is correct, Mr. President. I have General Brown sorting out all the facts. There are several reasons why no planes were sent. This includes the location of the ship, the time of day, the inclement weather and the fact that there was superior enemy air power in the area.

General McConnell: We had only 24 fighters in Japan. There are 70 enemy fighters that were in the area around Wonsan.

The President: Well, say that. (When asked or when the question is raised about why no aircraft were sent to support the ship.)

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The President: How many Navy ships do we have doing intelligence work like this?

Admiral Moorer: About 30.

The President: What about the question, Why didn't we escort this vessel?

Admiral Moorer: It would be a provocative act. We could not accomplish the mission. It would take all the entire Navy to escort them.

The President: I think you should set up an independent board to investigate this whole matter to head off any investigations by the Congress or other groups. Have you checked this Gulf of Tonkin incident theory?

Secretary McNamara: Yes, sir.

The President: I think you should take the orders, explain them, and justify them. I do not have a log of this incident yet which is satisfactory to me. Everybody is looking for a scape goat, and you had better get the facts.

General McConnell: Commander Bucher did not know he was in serious trouble in time to do anything anyway.

The President: Well, say it.

General Wheeler: We would have been in a fine fix if we had sent planes up there. We probably would have been in a war.

The President: You should go upto Congress with all of your guns blazing. Give them the facts before they have time to question you on them. I thought Senator Stennis handled himself very well yesterday. Did anyone talk with him before he went on the air?

General Wheeler: General Brown talked with Senator Stennis.

The President: A senator (Senator Ted Kennedy of Massachusetts) told me he was very worried about our situation in Vietnam. He said that some of our top generals have serious questions about our military strategy in Vietnam. I thought the Westmoreland-Bunker reply was a very good one. Bob (Secretary McNamara), I would go to the Senator and tell him you want to see what the

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various generals said to determine whether or not they were wrong -- or if what we are doing is wrong.

General Wheeler: I told General Westmoreland of this charge plus the one of corruption. I have not seen his response. I have been out there 14 times. General Johnson has been out there several times. General Chapman has been out there several times. General McConnell has been out there several times. Between us, I think we have talked to every general officer in Vietnam. I have not heard one word of criticism about General Westmoreland's strategy.

The President: Each one of you should write me a memo on the facts and what you have heard. The Senator says the generals think the Bermuda strategy is the one they want. Take this matter up with General Westmoreland, with the Joint Chiefs, and with Senator Russell. Let's get the right answers.

General Johnson: There is some corruption. But there is no disagreement over strategy among our generals.

The President: We cannot have perfection. We have corruption here. General Westmoreland and Ambassador Bunker and all of you are against corruption. You should point out how much corruption and crime we have in places like Houston, Washington, New York City, and Boston.

The President: What can we do if diplomacy fails?

Secretary McNamara: We have ten items put together by State and Defense to suggest for consideration.

The President: What is your guess on the possibilities of the North Koreans turning our men and the ship loose?

Secretary McNamara: The odds are more like 60 - 40 in favor of turning them loose.

The President: I think we should look at what we have learned from this. Let's look at what our intelligence ships are doing and determine if that is what we want them to be doing.

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